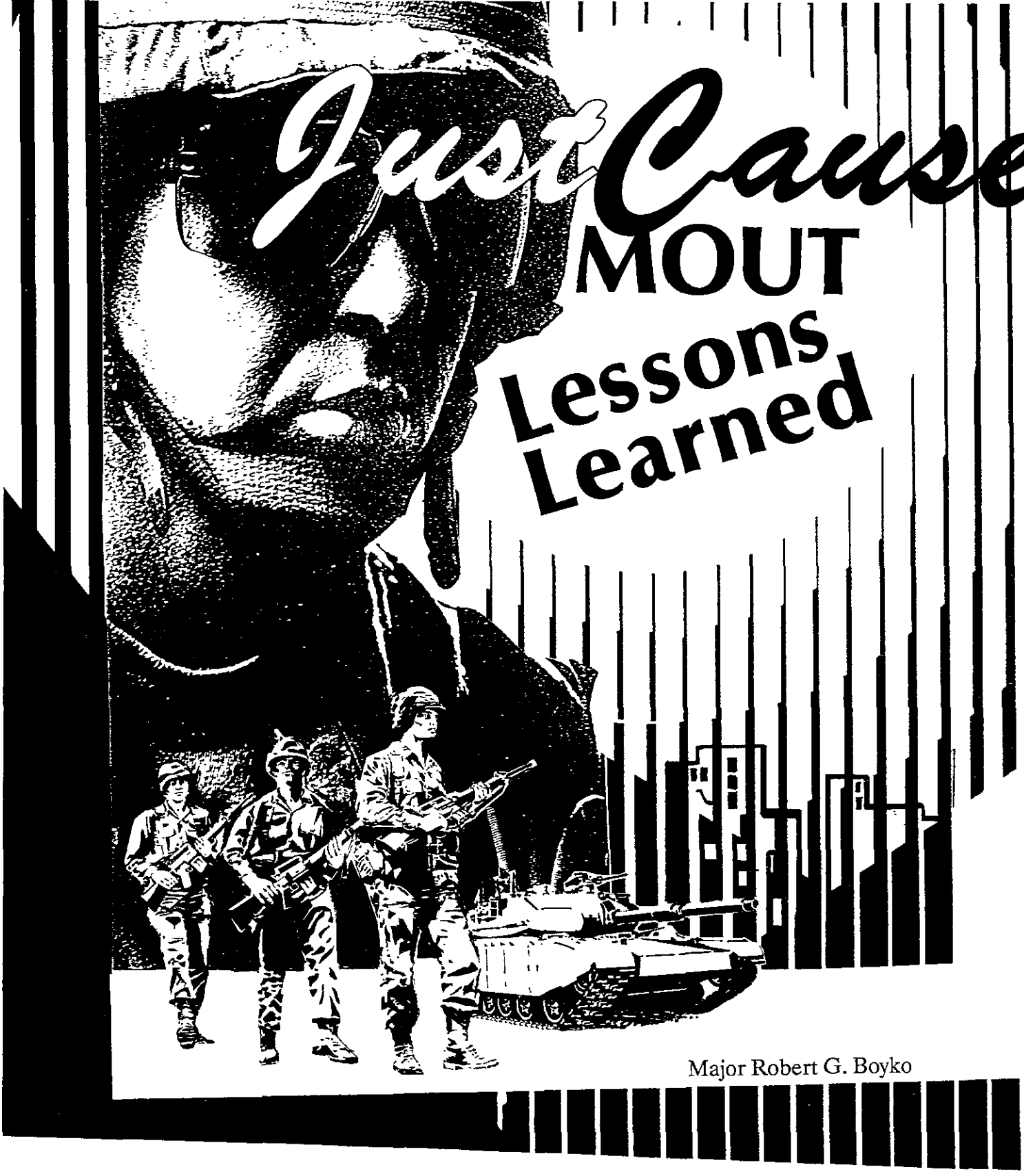

Just Cause MOUT Lessons Learned

Major Robert G. Boyko

In the early days of Operation JUST CAUSE in Panama (December 1989), my battalion deployed from Fort Ord, California, into the Curuncu section of Panama City. Our mission was to secure the area from pro-Noriega forces and to restore law and order—a mission for which none of us had ever trained.

I am not convinced that our current MOUT (military operations on urban terrain) training is preparing us for the kind of city fighting we may do in the future. The training I had received both in a unit and later at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth focused on a Stalingrad-type of city fight. But Stalingrad, by the time the Germans and the Russians began their epic battle there, was essentially deserted. It was a fight to the finish with no civilians, no rules of engagement (ROEs), and no restrictions on the use of massed firepower.

Our recent history has shown that what we are more likely to face in a city environment are small enemy units or individuals mixed in with a large civilian population. It is a situation that calls for strict rules of engagement and a selective use of firepower to keep collateral damage to a minimum. This was the case in the Dominican Republic in 1965, in Detroit in 1969, and in Panama City in 1989. The Battle of Hue during the Tet offensive of 1968 was more violent but it still required the surgical use of firepower.

I have every reason to believe that city fighting in the future will resemble that in Panama more than that in Stalingrad. For this reason, I would like to share some MOUT lessons my battalion learned as a result of its experiences during Operation JUST CAUSE.

Unfortunately, my battalion did not know it was to be committed to fighting in Panama City until I, as S-3, received the regimental operations order (OPORD) after we arrived in Panama. Then, when the battalion commander's aircraft had problems and was delayed in arriving, I had to begin developing a plan for accomplishing our mission. My mind swirled with all the MOUT training I had had about securing a foothold and clearing from house to house.

My brigade S-3 probably saved the lives of a lot of Panamanian and some U.S. soldiers as well by telling me about the 193d Infantry Brigade's success in another sector the day before: It had encircled the brigade's area of operations, had actively patrolled, and had used the intelligence gained from patrolling and from civilians in the area to identify possible enemy positions.

We tried that technique, and it became our method of operation throughout JUST CAUSE. Whenever we entered a new area of operations (AO), we tried to cordon the area off, show a strong presence, patrol aggressively, and use the intelligence we gained to target specific buildings or groups of buildings for search and clear operations.

We soon realized that we represented the first disciplined force in a city where there had been no order and control. The professional appearance of our soldiers probably kept many soldiers of the Panamanian Defense Force (PDF) from resisting further. I am sure it convinced many looters that their brief holiday was over. Beyond appearance, though, we tried to demonstrate a powerful military presence on all our operations through the use of tanks, aircraft, and our HMMWV (high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicle) gun vehicles.

Our immediate goal was to take the night away from the enemy, because that was when we received the most fire. The U.S. Army's night vision devices are the best in the world, and we used them extensively. We also sent our sniper teams out every night. We set up ambushes and traffic control points and ran numerous dismounted patrols. These actions disrupted enemy movements, reduced looting, seized curfew violators, and convinced the population that order had been restored. The extensive patrolling not only developed the situation, it also familiarized our soldiers with their AO and demonstrated a strong U.S. presence to the civilians in the city.

We learned that patrolling in this environment had to be tightly controlled, because the danger of misorientation and fratricide was great.

Patrolling in a city must begin with good maps of the area; we were fortunate enough to get city maps of 1:7,500 scale that showed all the streets and large individual buildings. Sometimes even this detail was not enough. In these cases, the leaders made their own individual sketch maps, usually out of cardboard from cases of MREs (meals, ready to eat).

Each patrol followed a preplanned route, and patrol leaders were not allowed to deviate from their route without battalion headquarters approval. Each patrol was also recorded in the battalion tactical operations center (TOC). Each had to have communications with its parent unit or else abort its mission and return to its assembly area. Patrols were rehearsed, rally points were designated, and all the other actions normally associated with patrolling were taken. In addition, a detailed briefing of the current ROEs was conducted before every patrol. Although a patrol could and did fire on targets of opportunity or in self-defense, it was not allowed to pursue the enemy out of its own sector. The battalion TOC either passed the battle against fleeing enemy troops from unit to unit, or committed the mobile battalion reserve. Finally, a detailed debriefing of each patrol was conducted.

MOVEMENT CHANNELED

Movement in a city is channeled. Therefore, we always tried to take the safest route and, more important, had an overwatch element on all moves. Before any operation, we rehearsed movement to contact and actions on contact. We found that it was often faster to move on foot in reacting to a threat or an opportunity than to mount our vehicles and move through the rubble that littered the streets.

We did keep a mounted reserve at battalion that consisted of the antitank platoon and a mortar section under the command of the antitank platoon leader. It was committed on several occasions to pursue or attack targets of opportunity. Our HMMWV drivers became adept at driving through city streets.

While some movements were faster by foot, the vehicles still gave us greater flexibility and logistical support. I was glad that 16 of our battalion's 35 HMMWVs were included in the airlift to Panama. The vehicles were used extensively, and every one of them played an important role. Fortunately, good preventive maintenance and a sharp motor sergeant kept them running. We sandbagged the key area of each vehicle to protect its occupants. We requested more vehicles for long moves and when they were not available borrowed civilian vehicles or, in one case, used a captured truck. We learned that scarce transportation assets have to be tightly controlled and that any movement must be extensively planned.

Controlling a force in a city is different from controlling

it in its usual training areas. City fighting is truly a platoon and squad leaders' fight. Sectors are tens of meters wide instead of hundreds of meters, and tall buildings add a vertical dimension to the battlefield.

We assigned sectors, boundaries, target reference points, and rally points. The key was for every squad member to know where the squad leader was and where the platoon command post was. We also required contact points between platoons.

We stressed the offense in Panama because we had the enemy on the run and because the faster we won the battle the faster we could go home. Still, some combat forces were assigned to guard "critical sites." The order to defend a television station, for example, forced us to commit a company (minus) to the mission. We tried to defend forward and placed obstacles in the streets to slow what the S-2 had correctly estimated would be our primary threats—car bombings and drive-by shootings. Our light engineers were experts in the use of local materials for obstacles, and our light infantry soldiers provided the labor.

It is important to realize that, regardless of the scenario, light infantry will always have to defend at some point, even if it is just local security. In a MOUT defense, each soldier must be careful to avoid becoming an obvious target. We constantly stressed security. We varied our position, changed guards at random hours, and passed patrols through from different points—everything we could think of to avoid becoming predictable. Since we did not believe the enemy was strong enough to retake lost territory, our goal in the defense was to reduce the number of targets of opportunity we presented to the enemy.

DEFENSIVE MISSION

Luckily, we were given only one defensive mission, and our primary focus was offensive. We conducted search operation missions to find enemy soldiers, weapons, and key PDF personnel. When our forces were in the area, and intelligence turned up leads, we would mount our search operations. We would cordon off the area we wanted to search, usually with a force of company size. Our search force would be the battalion scout platoon, an engineer platoon, and usually one additional infantry platoon. This force was commanded by one of our company commanders.

Our first attempts at sealing off an area would have been comical if this had not been a deadly serious business. Fortunately, though, we soon realized that we were trying to cover too much area. When we narrowed our focus by isolating individual buildings, we were more successful. A ten-story apartment complex, which we often found in Panama City, is quite an objective for a two-company force. But it can be cleared if the force has six hours, if the encircling force can seal the area, and if the searching force is well organized and trained for clearing buildings.

We always began our offensive sweeps with a display of powerful force. The venerable Sheridan tanks of the 82d Airborne Division that accompanied us had a tremendous psychological effect. When the tank platoon was detached from us, we used artillery in a direct fire role instead. Attack and reconnaissance helicopters flew overhead during all of our missions. As it turned out, we never had to fire either the tanks' main guns or the artillery, but I am sure their presence discouraged many a PDF soldier from resisting.

Since my battalion was not proficient in roof-top air assaults at the time (we now plan to work on it), we would enter a building from the bottom floor and move with security up to the roof. At the top we would reestablish communications and use snipers to watch the surrounding buildings. A favorite PDF tactic was to snipe at the security force from buildings just outside the search area.

Before starting to clear individual rooms, we used powerful HMMWV-mounted loudspeakers to explain what we were going to do and to ask civilians for their cooperation. The search began with the soldiers knocking on each unopened door. Doors that remained locked were opened with crowbars or, in a couple of cases, with C-4 explosives planted by the engineers. An explosion inside a building makes such a noise that it didn't take many before some of the residents found keys to open all the other doors.

ROOM SEARCH

Individual rooms were searched carefully and thoroughly. A cursory search of a room or building is worse than none at all. The PDF and local criminals could hide weapons in the most ingenious places. We found a big cache of AK-47 rifles suspended by ropes in an unused elevator shaft. On another occasion, we found grenades and a launcher under a pile of garbage in a building's courtyard.

After a while we were usually able to corner any PDF soldiers who were in the building. In the face of overwhelming odds, they invariably surrendered. I am sure that on several occasions some escaped by blending in with the civilian population, but we did find their weapons.

At least two soldiers and the room's occupants were present for the searches. This was to make sure the Panamanian people could see that we did not intend to destroy their rooms or steal any of their belongings. We then marked each room we cleared and posted security in each hallway. (Clearing buildings requires a lot of people.)

Our presence in Panama City in general, and our search operations in particular, brought us in close contact with a large civilian population. Most of the people in our AO were, if not pro-American, at least neutral. It was therefore imperative that we keep civilian casualties and damage to civilian property to a minimum. This is why rules of engagement are so important.

In any conflict, there will be ROEs, and every soldier must know them, although the rules may change often depending on political realities. By our last two weeks in Panama, they changed almost daily, and we continuously stressed the current rules. The fastest way to get into trouble

(except for fratricide) was to violate one of them.

Quite frankly, before we fired on anyone we first made sure that he was an enemy and that he would not surrender. Furthermore, we were very careful in using our firepower.

Every soldier needs to know that in a city he can make a positive or negative contribution to his unit's overall success by the way he treats civilians. I am convinced that we saved many Panamanian lives and probably a few of our own soldiers' lives by adhering to strict rules.

SUPPORT UNITS

An infantry battalion relies heavily on support from many other combat support and combat service support arms. During Operation JUST CAUSE, we learned several valuable lessons on the employment of these elements in a MOUT environment:

Indirect fire is severely limited in the city, both in getting permission to use it at all and in using it effectively. We were not allowed to use indirect fire in Panama City because of the risk of civilian casualties and the danger of fire. If the enemy had been dug in, I am sure we would have been given permission to use artillery, but probably only in its direct fire role. We did use direct fire artillery as an overwatch force, but it is slow to emplace. (If given a choice, I would take tanks over direct fire artillery every time.) The artillery, however, was valuable for its communications, and we used the artillery net as a backup to our own command net.

Although indirect fire is limited in a MOUT situation, it is important to realize that a platoon's direct fire weapons are very effective. The M16 rifle is an excellent assault weapon, and the M203 grenade launcher is deadly in the hands of a well-trained gunner. As a result of our experience in JUST CAUSE, we have greatly increased the number of live fire training exercises we conduct.

I also came away from that operation thoroughly convinced that snipers under centralized control are a great force multiplier for light infantry. Properly employed snipers in Panama demoralized the PDF.

Air support was limited, not for a lack of aircraft but because of the rules of engagement. Helicopter gunships were great for overwatching our movements, though, and would have been able to deliver a lot of accurate fire if we had needed it.

We found aerial reconnaissance to be overrated in Panama City. The times we had the most success with it were when my S-3 air was in a helicopter relaying information directly over our command net. Quite frankly, the pilots did not seem to know what an infantry force needed.

As for tanks, I love them. They are an infantryman's friend in city fighting. They can go anywhere. They can deliver steel on target and they scare the enemy. I cannot say enough about the performance of the Sheridan tanks that supported us. (When is light infantry going to get some tanks of its own?) Of course, we had to provide infantry security for them and had to work hard on communications. One of the scariest moments for me in the entire operation was when I had to cross an area that had received sniper fire and climb onto a tank because I didn't have radio

communication with the tank commander.

During JUST CAUSE, our light engineers were worth their weight in gold. They breached obstacles, showed the infantrymen how to erect defensive obstacles, and used demolitions to open doors and shafts and go through walls. In the latter stages of the operation, our engineers were issued some heavy equipment and were switched to civic action projects.

I found that we had to break down the engineer units into smaller elements than we normally did in training. Doctrine calls for the engineers to be committed as a platoon, or no smaller than a squad, but in actual operations we often had to send a demolition team or even a single engineer to advise an infantry platoon on how to build obstacles.

Some military intelligence assets proved valuable. The prisoner interrogation team we received gave us good realtime intelligence. Interpreters are a must. We were lucky to have a soldier in the unit who had grown up in our sector of the city, and he immediately became the battalion commander's radiotelephone operator. REMBASS (remotely monitored battlefield sensor system), ground surveillance radar, and higher level intelligence assets did not support us well, but I believe the weakness was in our own failure to train with them habitually in peacetime.

Finally, our ticket home was the requirement to turn a secured sector over to the military police, who would then help the new Panamanian police forces maintain law and order. Needless to say, every leader and soldier in the battalion worked hard on a good handoff to the MPs.

In fact, we coordinated well with the MPs at every level, and I wish we had had their expertise earlier in the conflict. The nature of their job requires them to work with civilians and in cities, and they could have taught us how to search buildings and individuals and what to look for. I recommend that, in any future MOUT operation, at least one MP advisor be attached to each infantry company.

After my battalion returned to Fort Ord, I breathed a sigh of relief that the enemy had been even less prepared for combat than we had been. As a result of our experiences, we now work harder on individual movement techniques and on squad and platoon drills.

We also stress marksmanship to a greater degree than before. As part of that training, we teach and reteach weapon clearing, function checks, and overall weapon safety. We throw grenades and use grenade assault training at every opportunity.

We work harder on soldier intelligence training, because our own soldiers in JUST CAUSE, by observing their AO and talking with civilians, provided us with most of the intelligence we received. Finally, all of our training exercises now have rules of engagement, and we check to make sure they are passed down to every soldier.

Our next experience with MOUT won't be precisely the same, of course. The enemy will probably be better; the fight will probably be tougher. But I believe the lessons we learned as a result of Operation JUST CAUSE have better prepared the battalion for its next city fight.

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